Ethics as social practice: debating ethics in qualitative research

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Ethics as Social Practice: Debating Ethics in Qualitative Research

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Abstract: Ethical issues have become increasingly important in research involving human beings. It is fitting, therefore, that *FQS* devotes a debate focusing on issues that are concerned with the many layers of decision making when it comes to ethics in qualitative research. In this contribution, I use a personal context to formally introduce the ethics debate. I extend an invitation to readers to contribute to this debate of ethical issues in qualitative research.

1. Introduction

It is with a great pleasure that I formally open the debate on qualitative research and ethics. Loyal *FQS* readers know that ethical issues have been addressed in the past, for example, in my review (ROTH 2003a) of *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath* (WOLCOTT 2002), in which the ethnographer-author admits to have had an initially unacknowledged homosexual relationship with his research participant. We also had an unofficial start in the previous issue (*FQS 5*[2]) with a contribution that describes the practice of introducing graduate students to the ethical questions of qualitative research (McGINN & BOSACKI 2004). My own contribution in that issue already provides a context for research ethics and a brief account of the historical circumstances for ethical issues in qualitative research (ROTH 2004a). In this editorial, I provide more argument for the importance of a debate about ethical issues in qualitative research and introduce the contributions to this first official issue covering the debate on ethics.

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Without doubt, ethics regarding human participation in research is an extremely important issue. In countries such as Canada, long gone are the days when government agencies and university researcher could do the covert radiation or mind control experiments, which they had been conducting during the 1940s and 1950s. However, some questionable research practices continue, though questioned and successfully fought in some communities. For example, medical research still uses double-blind experiments that administer potentially useful drugs only to one-half of the research participants. The general argument scientists make is that only the double-blind experiment is scientifically rigorous. However, AIDS activists in California successfully challenged such claims in the court, leading to the change in scientific protocols concerning new drugs thought to assist in the battle against the disease (e.g., EPSTEIN 1997). In her contribution to the ethics in qualitative research debate, Mary MAGUIRE (2004) describes how the children in her early research made her revise interview protocols to make them appropriate to the participants at hand. That is, scientists responded by developing new protocols that are recognized within their community and that do not disadvantage some participants in their trials.

There is no doubt that human research ethics *has to* evolve to respond to the continuously emerging possibilities for acting on the part of researchers and research participants – a stance that is very different than that found in religious groups of all brands, which reject adaptation of their ethico-moral standards to reflect sociocultural and cultural-historical changes of human societies.[1] Thus, whereas many researchers have keenly stayed with the times, other kinds of research continue to treat human beings in questionable ways. As I am writing this paragraph, an email exchange on the email list accompanying the journal *Mind, Culture, and Activity* concerns an article that had appeared in the *New York Times* and *International Herald Tribune* (CAREY 2004) about a social psychological study in which the memories of participants were tampered with to make them think that as children they had gotten ill eating certain foods. Peter SMAGORINSKY, one of the participants on the list commented, "I don't think this study would get through my university's Institutional Review Board" (xmca email, SEP 27, 2004).

Human research ethics has to evolve not only in the way some research treats participants during the project but also in the way any results are used. Thus, in quantitative research, the responses of individuals are irrelevant, ending up as deviations from the mean or as decontextualized blips on some corre-

[1] Although I do not want to over-generalize, I believe that there exists this general tendency across religion. The unwillingness of religious leaders to change may be seen from such examples as the American fundamentalist Christian efforts to teach creationism as a viable theoretical alternative to big bang and evolution, the continued preaching of abstinence rather than birth control by catholic priests, the continued Jewish practice of refusing pork despite the existence of refrigerators, or the insistence of Islamic leaders on women's wearing of head gear. I could continue adding examples from any other religious group I am aware of.

lation graph. It turns out that in statistical research not a single person has to correspond to the mean reported or lie on the regression curve, although there often might be good reasons for responses to be far away from the measures that they should have provided (HOLZKAMP 1991). As I resent the idea that my responses, meaningful in my life and those surrounding me, are but blips in some statistics rather than being taken seriously, I never participate in such research – unless my participation is compulsory such as in the surveys conducted by *Statistics Canada*.

Interestingly enough, qualitative researchers might find it harder to get their studies through ethical review processes (see, for example, the contributions by Robert ANTHONY [2004] and Linda COUPAL [2004]), because they come face to face with their participants and care about them. This is not to say that a qualitative researcher's caring attitude inherently constitutes a better relation with the participant. In my analysis of Harry WOLCOTT's sexual relationship with his participant, I was very critical of the exploitation that came with his care (ROTH 2003a). Rather, my experience as a chair of an institutional research ethics board shows that practitioners (counselors, educators, nurses) often propose studies that blur the boundaries of research and praxis, although they may not have the qualifications as practitioners. For example, I repeatedly read applications by graduate students in counseling psychology, who not only wanted to find out about some dimension of their participants' lives, but also thought of these interview sessions as a form of catharsis and therefore the beginning of a healing journey. However, because prior to obtaining a degree and receiving licensure, they legally are not in the position to practice counseling. This makes qualitative research even more complex. In part, it is these complexities of qualitative research and the fact that there are genuine interactions between researcher and participant (e.g., special issues on subjectivity and reflexivity, *FQS 3*[3] and *4*[2]) that make a debate about ethics so important.

2. A Personal Context of Ethics and Ethical Issues

In this section, I introduce the five contributions belonging to this new *FQS* debate on ethical issues in qualitative research by situating some of the issues in my own experience as researcher, member of a research ethics board, and chairperson of a research ethics board.

2.1 Ethical review and researcher-participant relation

When I began doing research in 1986 in a small project with my doctoral supervisor and then in my own dissertation project, I was unaware of any debate about research ethics. I was thinking about and experiencing ethical issues nevertheless: Each time I interviewed someone or asked someone to participate

in research and then to think aloud about mathematical problems, I felt awkward, experiencing myself as imposing something. I was asking for a favor, or more poignantly, I was asking for a gift *from* my participants, which is something I was taught that one does not ask for. This feeling of awkwardness about the imposition and the request for a gift has never left me, though my participants of all ages have been signing forms in which they consented to participation and although each day in the field I ask participants whether they continue to consent to participating. The feelings concerning the ethical responsibilities in my research have little changed with the institutionalization of ethical review – as in other situations of social life, the institutionalization of rules introduces negative aspects to the social processes that it tries to improve.[2] For example, the increasingly technical and legalistic consent forms that ethical review boards require not only provide guarantees but also questions the levels of trust human beings naturally bring to their encounters. At the moment, policy statements on ethics have not addressed to sufficient degree the greater value oral consent would have in many forms of collaborative research and research with special populations (e.g. VAN HOONAARD et al. 2004). The fact that a legalistic document has to be signed before really beginning the main research process (technically, making contact and recruitment already are part of the research process, but occurs prior to consent) also means that there is something that *needs* to enter the relation between researcher and participant from the outside, legally protecting both. In fact, telling potential participants that a consent form has to be signed may question the trust that has previously developed between researcher and potential participant.

On the converse side, there is a definite need for protection of participants and researchers in some situations. For example, as it happened once at my university, a doctoral student may decide to write a dissertation on sexual abuse and draw on her own experience. If she claimed to be writing the truth about having been sexually abused – rather than in novel format – and named specific individuals, the potential for libel is created and a court case might be necessary to settle questions of fact and fiction. In this case, "participant," "researcher," and university need an agreement in place prior to the research project. But real situations are possibly more complicated than my gloss makes it appear – readers will find COUPAL's (2004) contribution as providing a review of the relevant issues. Furthermore, given that courts (in Canada for example) have been able to subpoena data from researchers, participants who possibly committed a crime need to know that the researcher may have to reveal their identity, which can lead to consequences for the participant (e.g., indictment).

The need for the protection of participant is an important aspect in the contributions presented by Mary MAGUIRE (2004), who writes about the vulnerability of young (bilingual and multilingual) children, and Anne MARSHALL and Su-

[2] Concerning the (ethical, moral) responsibility that human beings have to take with every single act see BAKHTIN (1993) and RICŒUR (1990).

zanne BATTEN (2004), who are concerned with ethical issues in research involving individual and collective participants from First Nations (aboriginal peoples). MAGUIRE (2004) discusses issues that arise not only from children participation, but also from participation of individuals who speak two or more languages some of which may *not* be English or French, the official languages of Canada. She strongly argues for research with children, that is, research that works *with* the children as subjects, rather than research *on* and *about* children, which typically takes children as its object. Along these lines, my own work in urban (inner-city) schools of the United States has led me to include students as members of the research team to make sense of the ongoing events and of their life-worlds in a collaborative manner. In publications, these students then become part of the author team. To make sure their voices are not deleted, a colleague and I have developed new genres of writing research (e.g., ROTH & TOBIN 2004) that maintain the voices of the different stakeholders in research – students, teachers, teachers in training, university-based supervisors, and researchers – without jeopardizing the scientific quality of the work or rather, increasing the scientific quality, particularly with respect to the authenticity of the reported findings (e.g., ROTH et al. 2004). This kind of work throws new and different light on the issues that COUPAL (2004) raises – what if those who are perpetrators (racial injustice, sexual harassment) were to participate in the research?

These contributions to the debate show that research ethics is not something coming to us from "out there," in a process of immaculate conception of objective ideals, but that it is deeply bound up with issues of power, knowledge, agency, (individual and collective) identity, and control, to name but a few. Such issues also come to the fore when researchers attempt to receive approval from the relevant institutional research ethics board for a planned study.

2.2 Excesses and dangers of institutionalized review

I became involved in formal, institutionalized processes of research ethics following a somewhat heated debate between members of the Faculty of Education and the chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the University of Victoria. The point of contention was an apparent lack of understanding of educational research in the decision-making process of HREC. My contribution and those of other faculty members joining the committee was to produce reviews and recommendations to the researchers that were more sensitive to the context in which educational research was conducted. Despite the representation of the Faculty of Education through our membership, the complaints from graduate students and faculty members did not abate, and perhaps, even increased.

After two years as a member, I served two-and-one-half years as co-chair of HREC. As such, I was responsible for all applications for ethics approval that came from the Faculty of Education. For studies that apparently involved mini-

mal risk (as defined by the Canadian Tri-Council Guidelines [PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES CANADA 1998]), our review process was based on two reviews one of which was produced by a faculty member from education. I came to realize that the most unreasonable comments about the potential risks of a study came from those that represented the education faculty. More so, many of the HREC members never have conducted research involving human beings, let alone qualitative research in general, and classroom research in particular. Prior to my tenure as the chair (and again now after my tenure), researchers did not receive approval for their studies unless they responded to a growing list of what to do in this or that contingency. For example, researchers were asked to articulate what they would do if a person who had not signed a consent form were to walk in the background through the camera field of vision – such requests for responses were imposed even though the researcher had noted that "no data will be used unless ethics approval has been provided by those who appear in them."

Having done more than a decade of classroom research, I selectively chose from the reviewer comments those that I felt were concerns that needed to be addressed and weeded out others that appeared to be part of the inherently innumerable (i.e., infinite number of) unavoidable contingencies of all social life. I felt and enacted a responsibility not only to HREC, but also to the researchers involved and the participants that they intended to invite and include in the study. I know, however, that other chairs of the committee simply compile(d) a list of reviewer comments without making a decision whether they were reasonable or in fact represented an oversight of information already provided. These chairs acted as if they were not accountable for their actions, sending laundry lists of changes to be made by applicants without assuring some kind of consistency from one application to the next.

Three contributions highlight the potential dangers of ethics and ethical review that arise for researchers that come with institutionalization. Robert ANTHONY (2004) describes the nightmarish situation in which two nearly identical, complementary, and parallel studies have been evaluated very differently – one was approved after minor changes had been made, the other was associated with a long list of changes. To aggravate the situation, the chair of the research ethics board did not seem to feel responsible or accountable for the very different decisions she sent to the applicants. More so, she suggested to review both studies and to disallow them. This, as ANTHONY suggests, is a KAFKAesque situation where researchers no longer know what is going on and no system is in place that holds the REB and its chair accountable for their decisions and actions. Such a situation cannot be taken lightly, for, as I suggest in my own contribution, it leads to arbitrariness, power, and institutional control inconsistent with the democratic values of our nation and the scholarly communities in which we participate.

Linda COUPAL (2004) deepens the considerations ANTHONY articulates with her thoughtful theoretical analysis of issues involved in action research, where, as pointed out, the practitioner-researcher can find herself in the double relations of ethics and power of two interacting systems, the university and the workplace (here school system, school). Perhaps drawing on autobiographical experiences, the author exemplifies some of the issues through the character of practitioner-researcher Veronica. The protagonist initially was prohibited to conduct research within her organization on race relations, but her study concerning a gender-based analysis was approved. When her research identified a situation of sexual harassment, the organization and the university conspired to disallow continuation of her research. (I can attest that a case like this happened during my tenure as HREC co-chair, but I am unfamiliar with the details of the case because the other co-chair dealt with the situation.) Veronica found herself caught in the ethics-power connection that emerges within different interacting institutions. COUPAL provides a clear analysis of the ethical, moral, and political tensions within which practitioner-researchers operate in such a situation.

My own contribution (ROTH 2004b) begins with the problem of reporting on institutional practices from the inside, a phenomenon referred to as "whistle blowing." Writing about problematic issues related to ethics reviews and institutional research ethics boards potentially comes with annoyances, which range from silencing by gagging clauses (e.g., "no research can be conducted without REB approval") to discredit by research of other colleagues (OLIVIERI & SCHAFER 2004). Such silencing may occur, although the courts ruled – e.g., in matters of government scientists who publicly denounced unethical practices in drug approval processes – that "where a matter is of legitimate concern requiring a public debate, the duty of loyalty cannot be absolute to the extent of preventing public disclosure by a government official" (p. A3). The authors further argue that "an organization that forgets its mission has ceased to exist" (p. A3) when it values loyalty over moral principle in its search for control. COUPAL's (2004) contribution illustrates what can happen to research when it uncovers and describes situations that are damaging to an organization: it will use its influence with the university, interested in having good relations with the community, to shut down the research, gag the researcher, and potentially threaten her with not conferring a degree. All researchers open themselves up to retribution when the blow the whistle on incomprehensible practices, for example, when the chair of an ethics committee insinuates that a proposal may not be granted approval (see ROTH 2004b).

3. Conclusions

Ethics in human research constitutes a potential mine field. Practices possible only yesterday may no longer be acceptable tomorrow – though there are re-

searchers who defend Harry WOLCOTT (2002) and his sexual relationship with a research participant, I doubt that a research proposal would pass today if the possibility for such a relationship were to be articulated. Even if it is not articulated, the current drive toward introducing institutional supervision of studies by research ethics boards will certainly lead to the increasing requests for demonstrations of public accountability. Thus, as COUPAL reports, an ethics approval may be revoked leading to a stop of the research activity.

The present contributions to the *FQS* ethics debate show that phenomena postmodern, feminist, and critical scholars articulated in other contexts are also relevant to ethics and ethical review. Thus, rather than referring to some ethereal standards given to humans by some divine entity, the terms "ethics" and "ethical review" denote social practices that are as contingent and socially constructed as the scientific research process itself, a fact that we have come to be familiar with following recent work in science studies (e.g., KNORR-CETINA 1981). Therein lie both their weaknesses and their strengths. On the one hand, the weaknesses arise from the fact that they are socially constructed and contingent, ethics and ethical review could be otherwise. There is no standard outside (academic) society that we can draw on for stating why they are this rather than some other way. On the other hand, their strengths arise from the fact that they are contingent and socially constructed, because this gives us the hope for and allows us to rethink changes in the way we enact ethics and ethics reviews. I view the human condition in general and social research in particular in the spirit of Karl MARX's eleventh thesis on FEUERBACH, according to which philosophers only seek to understand the world when the real issue is to change it.

4. Invitation to Contribute

It is in this spirit of thinking about, rethinking, and changing ethics and ethical issues that I call for contributions to this debate of ethics in qualitative social research. These contributions may represent the different perspectives of different stakeholders in qualitative research – applicants and assessors in ethical review processes, graduate students writing theses and their supervisors, students and teachers, administrators overseeing the ethical review boards in their institutions, and so forth – I welcome all of them as authors.

The contributions may represent a broad range of issues but will focus on research ethics as their central theme, which we may come to better understand through its interactions with other themes, such as the issues of power and knowledge addressed by the contributors to this issue. I envision and call for contributions to the topics of ethical issues in research involving previously marginalized populations (of researchers and participants alike) with boundaries having occurred along the lines of gender, race, culture, socio-economic

status, language, age, and many other categories of social life. I am also interested in reading analyses of the institutional processes that deal with ethics and ethics applications, especially when this institutionalization has introduced idiosyncrasy and arbitrariness into play and when research ethics is used to stabilize hierarchical structures in universities and other places. That is, I welcome any piece that shows how ethics and ethics review are social practices that cannot be analyzed by getting into the heads of individuals, but that require careful social, cultural, and historical analyses.

As to the form of the contributions, I welcome any relevant genre in which the ethical issues in qualitative research are approached. It may be a first-person account, for example, of the difficulties to get an action research project through ethics review; it may be a third-person, for example, to articulate a theory-based analysis of the ethics review process; or it may be a mixture of the two – similar to the kind of analysis I used in to deconstruct decisions in our Canadian funding institution (ROTH 2002). I can envision letters to the editor on ethics issues, or responses to previously published pieces, lending support or critically reflecting their contents. I can envision multi-column texts where the two texts present alternative perspectives and may stand in a dialectical relationship (e.g., ROTH 2003b) and I can imagine the use of new forms of text appropriate for expressing ethical issues from different cultural perspectives – e.g., Peter COLE (2004), an aboriginal scholar, writes his critique of Western-style research without punctuation and using a poetry structure – or the use of multiple media to explore new forms of expression (e.g., ROTH 2001).

I welcome any contributions but would like to work towards addressing pressing issues in a thematic way, beginning with clusters of contributions focusing on qualitative research (a) in urban settings, (b) where gender is salient, and (c) involving members of aboriginal peoples and First Nations.

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